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By Donna Rhodes

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TILTON — In response to an invitation from the Tilton Board of Selectmen, U.S. Congressman Charlie Bass, accompanied by State Sen. Andrew Sanborn, met with the board, as well as the public, for an open discussion on concerns shared both the town and its residents during the May 19 selectmen's meeting.

Sanborn sat in on the meeting with Bass at the request of District Four Sen. Jim Forsythe, who was unable to attend.

Bass said meeting with residents and officials in his district is high on his priority list during his current term, and he sets one week per month aside to visit the towns and communities in the Second Congressional District.

"I'd say 60-percent of the job is communication; cementing relationships with the people you represent, whether you love me or not," said Bass.

Selectman Katherine Dawson began a lengthy discussion with him concerning oil industry regulations and expenses, during which Bass said he felt the solution to many problems with energy costs today lies in increasing the diversity of sources from which it is derived to alleviate the dependency on oil, coal and gas.

"We have solar, wind and some of the highest technology development right here in the Merrimack Valley," he said.

Bass also stated he felt the Northern Pass proposal to construct hydroelectric power lines through the North Country portion of New Hampshire doesn't take into account the direct and indirect effects it would have on the state. He said the proposal needs to be revised so that, "Instead of feeling like victims, = residents of Grafton, Coos and Carroll counties would be fighting for this."

On the topic of nuclear energy, he said the major issue at this time is not the safety of newer plants like Seabrook, but how to dispose of nuclear waste.

With the floor opened to questions from the public, Marjorie Bonneville of Lochmere asked about his opinion on the future of the Postal Service.

Bass said he has not heard of any plans to privatize the federal mail service, but technology is beginning to take a toll on the industry.

"The Post Office is in grave danger of going the way of the railroad. No one is using it anymore. They do everything electronically now. If I was a postal employee, I'd be petrified," he said.

Bonneville, a retired postal employee herself, said her biggest concern lies in the pension plan for retirees and how it has been funded. To make up for losses in the system, she told Bass there is a potential for many small post offices to be closed, something she feels is not a solution to the difficulties the service faces. Other plans to cut benefits, she said, are also not fair.

"We don't get Social Security due to federal retirement, so it just isn't fair to cut federal employees who took those jobs for the benefits," Bonneville said.

Bass told her he had not heard a single soul in Washington mention a cut in federal benefits, but he would investigate the matter.

Bob Hardy said he was pleased to see the Congressman, as it actually saved him postage for a letter he had recently written to his office.

Hardy said he is a member of the Tilton Parks Commission, the Conservation Commission and the New Hampshire Tree Program. He asked that Bass work toward the continuance of future conservation programs, and handed him the letter outlining his concerns. Bass told him all mail and emails to his office are answered, and he would respond in writing as soon as possible.

Board Chairman Pat Consentino brought up the topic of care for senior citizens and their needs within a limited income. Portions of the American Elders Act, she said she found "distasteful." She told Bass of the town's local initiative to assist the elderly and disabled, and said the Caring Hands Assisting Tilton committee finds itself picking up more and more of the "government slack" in areas such as transportation for elderly and disabled residents of the town.

"We're forgetting about seniors. They're the ones who made America great," Consentino said.

Sanborn said he had recently met with Nick Toumpas of Health and Human Services, and would come back to the selectmen for a conversation on elder care programs at the state level. He is scheduled to return to the board on June 20.

Finally, when asked what he felt was his biggest challenge as a Congressman, Bass replied, "Jobs. We need to create a climate where we can get real work."

He said he didn't believe the government could create those jobs, but felt it needed to stabilize spending in order to allow citizens an opportunity to better the workforce with the creation of more jobs and businesses.

"We need to provide opportunities so people have real jobs. That's where the country needs to go," said Bass.